

Literary Analysis: Theme

The havoc that fear and suspicion can wreak if not countered by reason is the most obvious theme of *The Crucible*. A **theme** is a central idea of insight that a writer tries to convey in a literary work. Miller's depiction of paranoia in Salem and his references to America in the 1950's make clear his ideas on the topic.

A work of literature may have more than one theme. Miller carefully intertwines other topics and themes as well. The personal motivations of the characters, for example, contribute to their fates along with the religious issue of witchcraft. John withholds critical information about Abigail, for example, because of his past relationship with her. Hale's academic pride blinds him to hysteria's momentum for too long. How does Miller spin these threads into themes about people and how they behave? What themes does he express?

DIRECTIONS: Use the following chart to help you identify themes in *The Crucible*. In the first column are subjects or topics that Miller addresses in the play. In the second column, write a sentence that states a theme about each topic that the events in the play express. In the third column, list the events or evidence in the play that points to the theme you've identified.

Topic	Theme	Events in Play
1. Guilt	Personal feelings of guilt sometimes move people to make extreme choices.	Proctor hides the truth about his relationship with Abigail. He chooses to die to atone for what he believes he has done wrong.
2. Revenge	Personal vengeance is a hidden motive for public actions.	Abigail brings John & Elizabeth to doom. Thomas Putnam cries out against his neighbors for their land.
3. Pride	Pride in position or accomplishment can blind one to truth.	Hale learns too late that his books do not hold all the answers. Danforth never abandons his pride of power, even though he seems to know he uses it wrongfully.
4. Intolerance	Intolerance is rarely a virtue and often leads to disaster.	If even questioning of the accusers, the evidence and the proceedings had been allowed, then murder would have been avoided.
5. Authority	Authority offers no guarantee of goodness.	Hale's authority heightens his vanity, and Danforth's too. Both are trapped by it, and abuse it too. Once Danforth has ordered the executions, he has to go ahead with the others to preserve his position.
6. Integrity	Integrity belongs to people, not authorities.	Hale belatedly recovers his integrity by abandoning his position. Proctor chooses to die rather than live as a liar.